

Adolescent Girls' Reactions to a Body-Image-Centered Young Adult Novel

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by

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### **Abstract**

How our young readers react to the books they read can say a lot about the way that young adult literature is written for and about them. Amid societal expectations to be the ideal body type, young female readers find this message reflected in the books written for their age group. These texts either perpetuate this message or humanize the experience of being perceived as overweight as an adolescent. Qualitative research taking place in book clubs has been conducted to explore perceptions of body image; however, my research addresses specifically middle school female readers and their engagement within book discussions in response to a body-image-centered young adult novel. I conducted qualitative research in a book club with 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls to discuss and record their reactions to the text *Dumplin'* by Julie Murphy. These reader reactions served as crucial data as I observed a pattern in their responses during my analysis. I found that during adolescent book discussions, participants position themselves in relation to the texts they read and may purposefully distance themselves by remaining either disconnectedly objective or passive and engaging sparsely, if at all, with the text, during group discussion. This contrasts with participants that engage with the text and its message, contributing and driving discussion. With my analysis, educators may foster their understanding of students with limited engagement and implement practices that are more effective for these students and the structure of book discussions in the classroom.

### **Social Construction of Body Image**

The self-perception of one's body, otherwise known as *body image*, situates the self and its construction within society amid disseminated expectations and restrictions. Popenoe (2004) states that society's idealized body types and sizes aren't just what's trending this season but "are physical manifestations of beliefs and practices that are anchored in a wider set of cultural values" (p.16). Furthermore, this constructed preferred body type is assumed to possess "connotations of self-discipline, strength, industry, and general virtue" (p. 16).

But what does this look like? While many different cultures have their own interpretation of the ideal, within Western culture, thin and attractive encompasses the 'the absolute ideal': society instructs that thin is undoubtedly in, and the fat body type or the Other is negative (Quick, 2008). Individuals within Western culture also experience a great pressure to accept their personal freedoms and build an identity, from temperament to appearance; however, it must be based on and within society's expectations (Kulick & Menely, 2005). Thus, Kulick and Menely continue, if an individual fails to live up to this ideal, it is not a fault of the society's expectations but a fault of self-control and personal beliefs.

It's not just subjectively and physically mature women who face this barrage of harsh expectations and unforgiving punishment, but young women that are still developing their identities and bodies are also at risk. During adolescence, girls develop physically as well as emotionally, beginning to form a sense of self and identity. However, the forming of this self-perception, of which body image is apart, is not wholly separate from society. During this time, girls are concerned about how they are perceived and are keenly aware of this as they change developmentally. The pressure to follow society's standards of beauty, appearance, and body ideals are felt as adolescent girls develop through middle school and into high school (Pipher,

1994). The supervision of developmental changes as well as girls' pursuits to achieve these ideals is strictly monitored by peers and family, to the point where it takes a psychological toll, forming low self-esteem and poor perceptions of body image (Lalik & Oliver, 2007; Quick, 2008).

Society's "pervasiveness of the idealized female body" (Parsons, 2017, p. 191), including its permissible forms, is a social activity with ubiquitous participation from the media, industries, and popular discourse, creating a commentary of anti-fat bias. Perpetuating these cultural ideals fuels fitness empires as well as television shows, communicating what not only is desirable but preferable in a culture's participants.

Media and its various forms can influence the construction of society's ideals, including body image, as mainstream media is often where women seek information on how to look (Hendriks, 2002). What these women find, however, is a staggering standard to be reached with thin models and beautiful women positioned and preened to their most desirable to sell products, act on television, and to serve as role models (Kinnally & Vonderen, 2012). Harrison (2000) calls this omnipresence "thin-ideal media", which promotes thinness as a necessary trait of the most "beautiful, desirable, and successful protagonists" (p. 121) in shows, advertisements, and even television personalities. But not every star who hits the red carpet is universally adored for their body type. Singers and actresses alike who are viewed as fat are often the subject of ridicule and are the focus of unflattering stories and pictures (Kinnally & Vonderen, 2012). One of the most notorious examples of this is the end-of-summer beach body tabloid spread, showcasing embarrassing poses and pictures of celebrities at the beach, featured in magazines and online news sources.

While some of this may seem all in harmless fun, the consistent intake and interaction with the media and the messages they convey is more likely to impart their explicit messages upon the viewer, reinforcing these social values (Shrum, 2009). While viewing these media figures, one may assume that their success and social desirability derives from their idealized body, and when more viewers observe these figures, these images and their inherent messages become more accessible and accepted (Kinnally & Vonderen, 2012). To separate themselves from the Other that media creates, an industry of re-invention has sprouted to accommodate those seeking to become part of the same ideal as models and movie stars.

A billion-dollar industry has emerged to do just that, amassing significant creative and financial resources to perpetuate this societal "requirement" of thinness (Klein, 1996). From cook books and self-help videos to gym memberships, and from dieting regimes to drugs, the desire to lose weight has not only overtaken our national ideals but our wallets (Kulick & Menely, 2005). This call to treadmills and dieting pills isn't a phenomenon that occurred within a vacuum, but is a conflation of beliefs and perceptions of what constitutes the ideal body type. Even then, with all of these resources and opportunities to exercise and "eat healthy", there are some unexpected results. According to Klein (1996), 76 percent of dieters are fatter three years after their dieting began, postulating that even though individuals are attempting to make strides towards a healthier lifestyle, they are not getting thinner but fatter. However, there is a Catch-22 for those uncomfortable with their body image when participating in gym work outs or practicing certain exercises in public; there lies a fear in society of being viewed as out of shape, but when these individuals go to the gym to remedy this, they are uncomfortable with their body and are likely not to return (Brudzynski & Ebben, 2010).

Society perceives the gym memberships and meal replacement shakes as a necessary expense to achieve what some may never truly reach or feel satisfied with. The pursuit of losing weight is a collaborative game with no clear ending, despite the enormous time and effort dedicated to reaching a state of *thin*, something that may mean different things to different people.

Discourse surrounding fat within Western culture is usually perceived and expected to be negative. Whether it's a new commercial for a dieting pill or the subject of a competitive weight loss show, the dangerous "f" word is either insinuated in conversation or brought to the foreground in large, flashing letters. Fat, however, is not always underrepresented or ignored. Within adolescent girls' circles lies an interesting facet of fat discourse: fat talk. Fanny Ambjörnsson's essay "Talk", featured in Kulick and Menely's *Fat* (2004) describes her experiences working with adolescent girls who discuss their fat to cement social bonds and build relations amongst girls.

This talk, she describes, however, was never positive, with discussions about one's own imperfections as a means to belittle oneself and be showered with compliments, feel justified when others share similar complaints about their own bodies, and to experience thin-female comradery. Ambjörnsson (2004) describes the rules of these intricate conversations: "...refer to yourself as fat and in need of improvement ... to be able to talk successfully about your fat body, you cannot be fat yourself" (p. 114). These conversations, still held today, can either connect girls together over the shared experience of being held to a certain body image expectation, or can create an Other. Fat girls, or "chubby" as Ambjörnsson (2004) describes them, cannot participate in these talks, as if their own "failed body" (p. 115) is catching, making the girls uncomfortable. However, this exclusive rite as an adolescent girl imposes changes to how one



views oneself. In expressing their dissatisfaction with their bodies, “the experience of worrying about fat is normalized; it is something you face because you are a girl” (p. 115).

Not all discourse about fat takes place with friends or even in the real world. The growth of social media, and the ways it connects us, is absorbed with it both meaningful and harmful discourse about fat. According to a study examining comments about fat discourse, the Internet, Twitter and Facebook were some of the most popular channels for derogatory statements and misogynist speech about obesity (Chou, et. al, 2014). Furthermore, two of the top three tweets, or posts, with over six thousand retweets (a form of sharing these posts on Twitter), that contained the word “fat” were jokes about fat women or, as they refer to them, “fat b\*\*\*\*”s. However, not everything they found was inherently negative discourse surrounding the fat community Social media including “supportive online communities that provide compassionate, nonjudgmental spaces for individuals to share weight-related experiences and efforts” (Chou, et. al., 2014, p. 315). However, when adolescent girls participate in negative discussions about weight, either online or not, Ambjörnsson (2004) warns that normalizing dissatisfaction with ones’ own body, also makes a girl’s battle with her weight a part of her identity.

### **Reading and Valuing Young Adult Literature**

Society’s interpretation of appropriate bodies is accessible to everyone and remains very visible. It is also available in many different forms, including literature. With each new story, readers are given the opportunity to build upon the many facets of pre-existing knowledge about oneself and society. These stories “provide ... a map of possible roles and of possible worlds in which action, thought, and self-definition are permissible or desirable” (Bruner, 1987, p. 66).

When engaging with the text, readers bring with them their past experiences and stances, setting up a framework of unique understanding with which they approach the text and create a transaction of information and perspective between text and reader (Rosenblatt, 1982). Not only may the reader learn more and expand upon their previous knowledge as Rosenblatt suggests, but they may further improve upon their own understandings of either themselves or that which is around them. This kind of literacy and engagement is crucial to becoming active thinkers, improving reasoning, and being more receptive to different perspectives (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). According to Louise Rosenblatt's (1982) transactional theory, readers may also "live through" the textual experience and forge personal relationships with characters and events during "aesthetic reading" (p. 269). In doing so, readers' responses are founded on personal connections and feelings that are fueled by the transactions they make with the text, influencing and building upon their pre-existing knowledge and understandings (Rosenblatt, 1982).

Adolescent-focused literature, or young adult literature, shares stories that usually feature adolescent characters with issues and topics relevant to that age group. While not typically as straightforward as it sounds, many of the novels are focused around the developmental changes that seemingly 'control' these protagonists' lives: including physical and psychological changes, worry over peer approval, and the forming of ones' identity (Pipher, 1994). However, while this is an outlet for many of the concerns and celebrations of this age group, readers are still impressionable to this form, as well as all forms, of media when it comes to body ideals and cultural expectations. The process of young adult readers interacting meaningful with young adult literature "invites [them] to make personal connections and think deeply about ... social and political issues" (Smolen & MacDonald, 2008, p. 208). So, the act of reading does not take

place in a vacuum but is molded by the conflation of social and cultural contexts as the reading takes place and is then interpreted by the reader after they put down the book (Park, 2012).

Literature that is intended for particular age groups has the potential for great power, particularly if it reinforces what society regulates and punishes, such as female weight and body image. This does not mean that a reader is wholly malleable by the texts they interact with, but literature becomes another outlet for society's overt messages, creating an echo chamber for the reader.

### **The Portrayal of Girls in Young Adult Literature**

Within young adult literature, adolescent girls are often the subjects and target audiences of novels. These stories serve as opportunities for readers to read about characters like them and events they may have experienced. As these adolescents grow older, they develop both mentally and physically, and these texts showcase female characters that are experiencing these highs and lows of maturing. However, in the case of body image, fat female protagonists that challenge the status quo regarding their weight and self-esteem are few and far between. Overweight female characters are usually relegated to charming, if a bit burdensome, sidekicks and aren't prominently featured as the protagonist (Quick, 2008).

In the event that the main character is a fat girl, she takes on the dual role of both the quirky, outcast friend, and antagonist, with her relationship with fat being her 'biggest' battle yet. As is expected of the overweight female protagonist, she realizes the error of her ways and conforms to what her family and friends have expected of her and loses any excess weight, primarily thanks to her newfound determination and prospective love interest who waits to approach her until she has shed the pounds and improved her appearance (Quick, 2008). These seemingly anti-fat novels have become an extension of society's implicit messages in thin-ideal

media and its harmful effects. Young women at this age are especially susceptible to the self-deprecation of this kind of discourse, internalizing the perception of their appearance as unnatural and Other (Quick, 2008; Solovay, 2000).

Analyzing young adult literature with tacit anti-fat messages is relevant as both a researcher and an educator. By evaluating these novels and their impact on impressionable readers, as an academic community, we can better understand how society's expectations manifest in young adult literature. Studies have been conducted to place this kind of young adult literature under a magnifying glass. For example, Glessner, Hoover, and Hazelett (2006) analyzed a selection of these novels that perpetuated these ideals and found a recognizable pattern throughout their reading: the fat female protagonist's self-esteem and social life suffers because of her weight, she experiences an epiphany and rallies to change her fate by beginning a weight-loss transformation, she completes the metamorphosis by working hard and thus improving her self-esteem and, more importantly, sheds off the pounds that began it all. At last, the protagonist fits in with the rest of her peers in terms of appearance; an implicit message at the end of the text drives home the point to readers that "striving to look 'normal'" (p. 120) is what lets these girls become complete.

Parsons (2016) studied novels' inherent messages that are communicated to readers. She found that representations of fat female protagonists that portray overeating as food addiction appear to be skewed and inauthentic, perpetuating society's impressions of the fat female experience rather than breaking it down. Parsons draws the conclusion that this kind of literature, instead of supporting adolescent readers, "stigmatizes fat females who are already blamed for contributing to the obesity epidemic" (p. 24-25).

The ending so often portrayed in novels that feature these protagonists is that self-acceptance is accomplished “in spite of obesity” and living in “thin person’s world” (Quick, 2008, pg. 61) is the norm while the protagonist is still the Other. These implications and effects these literary messages have on the female adolescent reader who struggles with body image teaches a way of self-acceptance that is inauthentic and hinges on a scale’s number and others’ perception, rather than self-love and confidence.

By evaluating young adult literature under the lens of body image and female protagonists, the contributions made to educational research can help educators make informed decisions about the literature they introduce in their classroom or recommend. It’s not enough to have representations of an adolescent that is “struggling” with their weight, but to ensure that the selections provided to students are authentic and supportive. Unfortunately, popular young adult novels that feature fat female protagonists struggling with food addiction often “perpetuate rather than deconstruct the ideal female body and the lengths to which fat females should go to attain it” (Parsons, 2016, p. 24). These works serve as reinforcement of the pressures young women face and do not serve as developmentally supportive novels.

As an educator, to read about the damaging effects these works might have on adolescent girls is one thing, but by approaching the issue “in more than a merely speculative way” (O’Quinn 2008, p. 10), I can better understand the perspective of students that engage with a body-image-centered novel. It is my intention to better understand young women’s discourse surrounding body image, particularly in terms of their reactions within a literature circle, or book club. In doing so, I hope my findings will help inform fellow educators about the concept of body-image-centered novels. Instead of merely reading about these adolescent girls, learning

more about their responses to body-image narratives and facilitating meaningful discussions would be beneficial.

### **Methodology**

Conducting research through book clubs and literature circles is a way to collect data from reader response, learning more about readers' reactions and interpretations of text. Within these book club discussions, these interpretations "become springboards" (Polleck & Epstein, 2015, pg. 79) to reflect upon readers' personal experiences and the community within which they participate. Book club discussions can also yield multiple textual interpretations; differences in perspectives can help readers understand what 'assumptions' and interpretations they have with the novel, while also letting them consider alternative views to the text (Martin, 2001). As readers share their own thoughts in the group, this can help foster their identity formation process. Smith (2000) notes that literature circles and book clubs also help readers engage with others as well as the text and "[facilitate] the ongoing, ever changing process of identity construction" (p. 31). Pace and Townsend (1999), similarly, conducted their own research in literature circles with high school students about gender roles and the problematic female character Gertrude in *Hamlet*. These researchers believe that by discussing literature, students have the opportunity to "explore the complexity of human difference and human relations" and observe "how our community responds to human behavior and get at how we might be judged by our peers" (Pace & Townsend, 1999, p. 43).

### Literature Circle Book Selection

I structured my research process with a focus on literature circles and body-image-focused young adult novels. In order to gain a better understanding of adolescent girls and their stances and interpretations on body image and society's ideals, I selected *Dumplin'* by Julie Murphy, a 2015 young adult novel that features self-proclaimed fat girl Willowdean Dickson as its protagonist. As a sophomore in high school, Will juggles her job at a local restaurant, a summer romance with "peach-butt" Bo Larson, a tense relationship with her beauty-pageant-director mother, and her friendship with her American beauty best friend Ellen. As her summer fling grows, Will finds herself losing her self-confidence and ends things with Bo, beginning a rebound relationship with a kind football player, Mitch. Ellen finds new, albeit more toxic, friends at her job at a small-size dress shop and Will feels more alone than ever. Determined to win back her confidence, Will enters her mother's pageant to prove that she deserves to be considered beautiful. Other girls who feel ostracized in their high school join her. In the end, Will regains her self-love and confidence, and reconnects with her friend Ellen, old flame Bo, and even her mother.

I selected *Dumplin'* because of Willowdean's relationship with her body and her self-confidence. At the beginning of the novel, Will touts her status as a fat girl, introducing herself to her eventual love interest Bo Larson as such: "Willowdean ... Cashier, Dolly Parton enthusiast, and resident fat girl" and adds that she is "other things, too" (Murphy, 2015, p. 8). Willowdean acknowledges that her identity is, in part, based around her body and is unapologetic about it, despite the fact that her body type does not live up to the expectations society has set. I also selected this novel because it does not fall under Harrison's (2000) description of "thin-ideal media". In fact, Willowdean goes through a change during this novel, from being proud of who

she is to losing that self-confidence that was such a part of her identity, almost like a reverse of stereotypical body image young adult novels. This book also sets itself apart from the crowd because Will does not begin the “metamorphosis” of losing weight, nor does she particularly want to, breaking the pattern identified by Glessner, et. al (2006).

### **Study Design**

The research process to obtain permission from the Institutional Review Board, university, and school site was a collaboration between my university and other investigators. My study and findings were a part of a larger research project that was conducted with two other investigators, in which they also presented *Dumplin'* to high school and college age groups, respectively. Each researcher was assigned to a different literature circle of adolescent girls: middle school girls, high school girls, and girls attending college. In doing so, as researchers we could observe the development of body image from middle school to college, based on reactions to the same young adult novel.

### **Participants and demographics.**

According to Ohio's Department of Education's 2017 Report Card, the student population in the rural middle school in central Ohio where I conducted my research consisted of a little over 260 students: over 90% were White, Non-Hispanic and over 50% were economically disadvantaged. Any other indicators were not calculated if the student population was under ten in any particular category (Ohio Department of Education).

I worked within my literature circle with five participants from the middle school's 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I gained permission from an on-site teacher and the principal to conduct my research in the teacher's room during the lunch period. The school was relatively newly constructed, but for



a smaller school it had seen its fair share of foot traffic, especially since this research was conducted from the end of April to mid-May, towards the end of the school year. The classroom in which I conducted my research was a language arts class and was a room that all my participants had at least one class in that year. Walking into the classroom, bookshelves containing young adult novels lined the back of the class, while desks and the whiteboards were at the front of the classroom. When meeting with students during lunch, which lasted approximately 30 minutes, we kept the classroom door open but rearranged the desks to face one another during our discussions. The meetings began informally with talk about school, upcoming events, or about recent news stories until all girls were present with lunches either purchased from the cafeteria downstairs or “packed” and brought from home. Lunch only lasted roughly 30 minutes, and students returning from the cafeteria and waiting in the halls or making noise, signaled the end of our meetings.

Just outside the classroom, before I met with potential participants for the first time, the on-site teacher hung posters I designed to both invite and inform students about the research I would be conducting and a date that I would visit the school to speak with them about potential recruitment. All materials that I implemented including scripts, letters, advertising posters, and forms were approved by the Institutional Review Board. The recruitment took place during lunch outside of the cafeteria with roughly eight interested participants. At this time, I followed my recruitment script to discuss their questions as well as my aims for my research. Besides reading the script, I showed them a copy of the book that we would read in the study, presented to each of them a letter to parents that explained the study, and distributed both an assent form (to be signed by the student) and a consent form (to be signed by the minor’s parent) for each student. By presenting each potential participant with these documents, I ensured that all students were

not only given the same information but were given it regardless of their interest level at the end of the recruitment speech. Other than the initial recruitment session, site investigators did not initiate additional contact with possible participants. The nature of the study conducted was voluntary, and participants had the opportunity to withdraw at any time. If the students or parents had any questions that needed clarification, they could contact the site-investigator, me, privately over the phone or through email.

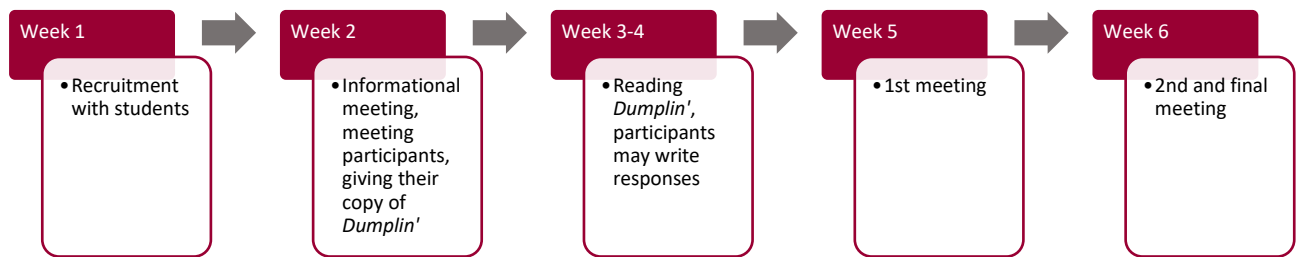


Figure 1: Research Timeline

The entire length of the study, from recruitment to the final meeting lasted roughly six weeks for students to read the book independently as well as write responses to the book before discussion. In sharing their reactions through conversations in the literature circle as well as written responses, the participants could share meaningful insights about the text. Students were given copies of the novel to keep after the study, but they were not granted any additional incentives for participating. Anticipated benefits from participating in the study included peer collaboration skills, an increased awareness of body positivity, and increased analytical and social connections.

Of the eight interested students, five participants turned in their assent and consent forms and contributed to the study. Each participant, to ensure their privacy, chose their own pseudonym and all electronic information recorded (such as transcriptions or notes) referred to that student by this selected name. Each participant attended the same middle school where these discussions were being held and were in the same grade: 8<sup>th</sup>. With a smaller participant size, the

discussion could yield meaningful discussions and interactions (Patton, 1990). During these discussions, I recorded participants' impressions, reactions, and conversations about the text. Participants' audio was recorded with an iPad during these meetings to aid in transcription following each meeting. After these recordings were transcribed, they were erased.

The girls, or participants, themselves were wonderful to be around during this time of discussion about body image and *Dumplin'*. The following descriptions of participants are in no particular order and refer to the students by their self-selected pseudonyms and were taken from whole-group interactions. All participants were White, Non-Hispanic and were comprised of different body types and participation levels.

1. Regina

- One of the most vocal participants of the group was Regina, who was also the smallest in terms of height and weight. Before each meeting, she would bring up her dance lessons, musicals she was in or had been listening to, and would mention school projects she was working hard on.
- When she spoke about the novel or about certain ideas, she never sounded unsure and was very confident in her answers.

2. Eva

- A girl who always packed her lunch, I had a chance to interact with her before the meetings more so than other girls. She was one of the tallest girls, but was not particularly athletic. Some of her favorite pastimes were reading and practicing piano. She was also involved musically but tended not to mention it or participate in conversation with Regina about it.

- She presented an interesting point of view during the discussions, sure of her answers but also eager to give platitudes about the ideals of body image.

### 3. Alberta

- This participant was consistently dressed in athletic clothing, with basketball shorts, athletic sandals, and school sport shirts as her daily attire. She wore a headband with a ponytail at all times and was one of the tallest girls in the group but also had the most muscle, with broad shoulders. She played basketball and softball, with very little down time to read or to participate in academic activities, she said. But she thanked me at the end of the study for giving her something to read on the way to and from practices.
- She was very confident in how she answered questions, especially concerning her own school's culture surrounding popularity and body image. Girls that participated in sports in rural schools are often associated with the popular crowd, and it seemed that she was talking about a phenomenon she was also a part of, but didn't acknowledge.

### 4. Alicia

- The smallest and quietest of our group was a member of marching band named Alicia. Short in stature but goodhearted in conversation, she seemed to enjoy our talks before and after our meetings. Before the end of the research, she had mentioned to her teacher how much she loved being a part of a club with other girls, especially involving books. She was thin but also short, with her hair up in a loose ponytail she had to keep fixing, she complained, during marching band.

- She was friends with Ash, another participant of the group, and the two often walked together to and from our group meetings. When other girls began to talk, she would usually look down or look to me for my reaction when others offered new ideas.

#### 5. Ash

- One of the most enthusiastic members of our group was Ash, the heaviest of our group and most developed. Her hair was short and she enjoyed talking about fan communities, or fandoms, surrounding Harry Potter and Star Wars. One of her favorite authors was John Green, and she loved discussing his YouTube personality and books with me. Before and after the meetings, she was usually very bubbly, talking about fanfiction she had read or about an online Korean language course she wanted to take for fun.
- During meetings, when it came to offering ideas, she was the only one of the group to write a written response and wrote a review of the book, choosing to view the novel as a text rather than an opportunity for reflection and conversation. Ash was eager to dissect the book rather than discuss its emotional content with other members of the group. Ash did not participate in the platitudes given about body image or fat discourse and was quiet during the second, and final, meeting we had.

#### **Transcription and analysis.**

Prior to beginning our two discussions about *Dumplin'* and our findings, I informed the students and their parents that audio recordings would be made of the discussion. These recordings were transcribed, and once the transcription was documented, the recordings were

erased. When addressing the students within the recording, likewise with all other documents and notes, the participants were referred to by their chosen pseudonym. I analyzed this data to better understand the participants and their reactions. In addition, participants' written notes were also analyzed as a part of the data collected. The process of transcribing this information gave me the opportunity to rehear the discussions and to begin to analyze its findings as I transcribed.

My analysis consisted of categorizing participant reactions. To begin, I reviewed my transcriptions and highlighted different kinds of reactions, forming general groups. In reviewing what the participants had said, I made additional notes as to how students reacted using non-verbal cues that couldn't be recorded. During this process, I was able to refine my categories of response and detect a pattern in responses that carried through our two discussions.

Once this was complete, I erased the audio recordings. Revisiting what I had transcribed allowed me to critically break down the discussions and approach my data at a deeper level. An important element of analyzing the two discussions was to compare the two when they were at different points in *Dumplin'*; what a participant shared or did not share at this time is as much of a factor as their words.

### **Findings**

It is never easy to discuss body image with others, let alone fellow students that attend the same middle school as you. When framing this research study, I knew from personal experience being a girl in the eighth grade, that silence and awkwardness is not uncommon when discussing a topic like body image, especially at this point of emotional and physical development. However, by analyzing this discomfort surrounding body image, we, as researchers, can investigate the implications of this literature and the tacit messages it

communicates. As discussion facilitator and investigator of the collected data, I witnessed interesting interactions between the participants unfold in response to the text. An intricate series of script-like responses and familiar patterns in conversation seemed to dictate our meetings, leading to a few silences and a variety of responses that fell into three categories: disconnected literary analysis, the use of platitudes, and the participants' efforts to maintain peer approval.

### **Disconnected Literary Analysis in Book Discussions**

Book discussions are not unfamiliar to the participants of this research study. Within the school system, book discussions are a way to analyze the text and draw upon their knowledge of writing mechanics and plot devices. This constituted a safe response because the participants could always use the environment of their middle school classroom to their advantage. Spinning the talk away from the subject of body image and their experiences or the protagonist's, and analyzing the text for its artificiality or the plot decisions seemed a safer response. Ash, the largest of the participants, took the helm of this kind of response, sharing that she believed that some parts of the text felt "artificial" and "felt too forced". In her written response, which she shared during our second meeting and read like a book review, she shared a few details:

- "*Dumplin'* was...okay. If anything, it seemed artificial in my opinion."
- "It just felt too forced, like Mitch was a last-minute add-in..."
- "I feel like the entire book was hastily put together after a point. Characters were easy to mix up if you didn't keep track."
- "Not only this, but it seems like there's too much back story. To me, there should be mystery about the characters. You should be left asking SOME questions"

In the conclusion of her review, she shared this:

“To me, this was a mediocre book, but it was okay enough, nonetheless. Had the flow been a bit better, it might have been enjoyable, but overall, it had a great theme, and I may read it once or twice more.”

While in this instance, Ash focused on the author’s choices, this mechanical language reminiscent of a middle school language arts class took root in the discussion while broaching other topics, specifically relationships.

The relationships seemed to be an important facet of the book for the girls, including the relationships between the protagonist and her mother, her boyfriends, and her friends. This was what I had hoped they would relate to, but deeper than their surface-level criticisms. The romantic relationships were regularly dissected by the participants. According to Ash, she believed that both Mitch and Bo were “pushed” on the reader, and neither of them contributed to the theme of the story. This was echoed by other discussion members:

REGINA

I didn’t like that he was big. We get it, it’s almost like it was saying big people go with big people. It was kind of annoying...Because Bo was like the pretty guy and Mitch was like the bigger guy, like he was supposed to be the obvious choice.

Within the text, the protagonist, Willowdean, begins a summer romance with Bo, a coworker who is handsome and, she previously believed, unattainable. After breaking things off with him, she goes on a few dates with Mitch, a football player who is large, like her, but is praised for his body type helping the football team. Eva echoed that this felt “forced”, going on to say that “He doesn’t really like have a big purpose in the book. Bo either. Like what the meaning of the book is supposed to be about.”



**Platitudes in Adolescent Book Club Discussions**

Platitudes constitute as safe responses because they are banal and may have good intentions, but are expressed so often that their meaning loses poignancy. These are familiar phrases that range from “believe in yourself” to “try your best and you’ll succeed”, and similar expressions that one may pencil in on a card. The following occurred during the final meeting with both instances resorting to platitudes in lieu of a genuine response. The first instance occurred after posing a question about Willowdean’s decision to change her talent to lip-syncing to Dolly Parton.

INVESTIGATOR

So why do you guys think she changed her talent, even though she knew she might get disqualified at the end of it?

ALBERTA

She thought that Dolly Parton like represented her more, like more than magic tricks would.

INVESTIGATOR

That’s interesting that you used the word “represented”. Why was she concerned about that?

ALICIA

It was important to her to show girls that if they’re big, it doesn’t matter.

ALBERTA

Or not pretty.

INVESTIGATOR

So what does the book seem to be saying about that?

At this point, the participants had taken to going around the circle, starting at my right. Everyone except Ash responded even if it did not build upon what had last been offered by another participant.

EVA

Don't care about your body image or how you look or where you come from.

INVESTIGATOR

Anyone else?

ALBERTA

Express yourself.

ALICIA

Be confident of who you are.

REGINA

Don't let anyone tell you how you're supposed to be.

The second instance of engaging in these platitudes happened towards the end of our final meeting together.

INVESTIGATOR

Overall, this is our last book club meeting. What have we learned or what have we taken away from the book?

EVA

Body image doesn't matter.

ALICIA

Um, to be more confident in yourself no matter how hard it is.

REGINA

You shouldn't have to change just because someone else wants you to.

These platitudes allowed the participants to share in the group discussions but did not share their genuine feelings in regards to the text. These discussions maintained a familiar peer-interaction found in middle school classes and, as such, did not require them to share personal details or experiences beyond what can be heard in typical class.

### **Maintaining Peer Approval**

Beyond the interactions that occur between the text and its reader, as a member of the discussion surrounding *Dumplin'*, the readers also oriented themselves as a part of a group. Coming in cold to the middle school that the five participants attended, I could have no way of knowing, but only infer, what the social interactions between them were like outside of our discussions. What I could tell, however, was that they were different individuals from different social circles.

After reading the text and approaching the group discussion with questions or comments about what was read, after offering a question or asking for more information, there was occasionally a pause as the girl surveyed the group briefly before answering the question, or it was picked up by a more vocal member of the group. Prior to the book discussion, a few students knew one another and sat next to one another regularly. Regina and Alberta sat next to one another while Alicia and Ash tended to stick together. Eva sat by me since she was usually the first to arrive for lunch after packing every day. Regina and Alberta were the most vocal of the group, one a dancer though short and the thinnest in attendance and the other tall and athletically built. Ash, who was also keen to share, was accompanied by the shortest member of the group.

During this time, I was seen as the one who could ask questions and move forward the discussion though I made it clear that they could chime in and ask their own questions or "take

the floor” as they wanted to discuss certain things. This opportunity of being handed the microphone didn’t sit well with any of the participants. Silence was not uncommon when asked to contribute further discussion such as: “Anyone else?” or “Anyone have anything to add?”. This was met with silence and a few glances towards the person they sat closest to. On one occasion, a participant was hesitant to share their own thoughts, perhaps even hesitating to correct the other member of the discussion group. Alicia had highlighted a point in artificiality, that the book overhyped the experience of someone overweight going out for a beauty pageant when Eva had interjected.

#### ALICIA

Like, it felt like kinda unrealistic because you’d think that girls who are like a little bit like bigger wouldn’t be like, going out to pageants, going further, being that confident. They do, like in real life. It’s not that big of a deal.

#### EVA

And plus they really don’t have like pageants around here, I mean, like, no girl from Ohio would probably participate in a pageant like this one.

In an effort to not embarrass her in front of others, Regina opened her mouth to correct Eva but stopped herself. After the group, I talked with Eva about a local scholarship pageant that is held annually in the area and had similar characteristics from the novel, one that I had participated in a summer before.

However, the participants did not only hesitate with their responses, but some experienced the opposite. What began as a point made about artificiality, a response that fell under literary analysis, what followed was the effect of the group’s dynamic.

ASH

In my opinion, some of it felt a little artificial.

INVESTIGATOR

Do tell. Why did it feel artificial?

ALBERTA

[Interrupting Ash] It didn't feel like a real high school experience. With us, (8th graders), I don't think anybody has dealt with that. Being an outsider.

INVESTIGATOR

Dealt with what?

ALBERTA

Nobody would really call someone out and make fun of their teeth. And tell it to their face. They would keep it to themselves.

EVA

It just seems like the kind of thing you'd find in a movie.

ALL

[Nods or acknowledging agreement, Ash and Alicia look at each other before nodding noncommittally]

ALBERTA

High school isn't really like that.

Alberta seemed to manipulate that introduction by Ash, who later gets to her point of not liking the romantic relationships in the book, and insists that the bullying sections of the book where teenagers ridicule classmates based on their physical features does not exist. Regina and Eva agreed by nodding their heads enthusiastically while Ash and Alicia shared a glance

between the pair of them tentatively nodding. Alberta has the final word on the matter by reiterating her point.

### **Discussion of Reader Orientation**

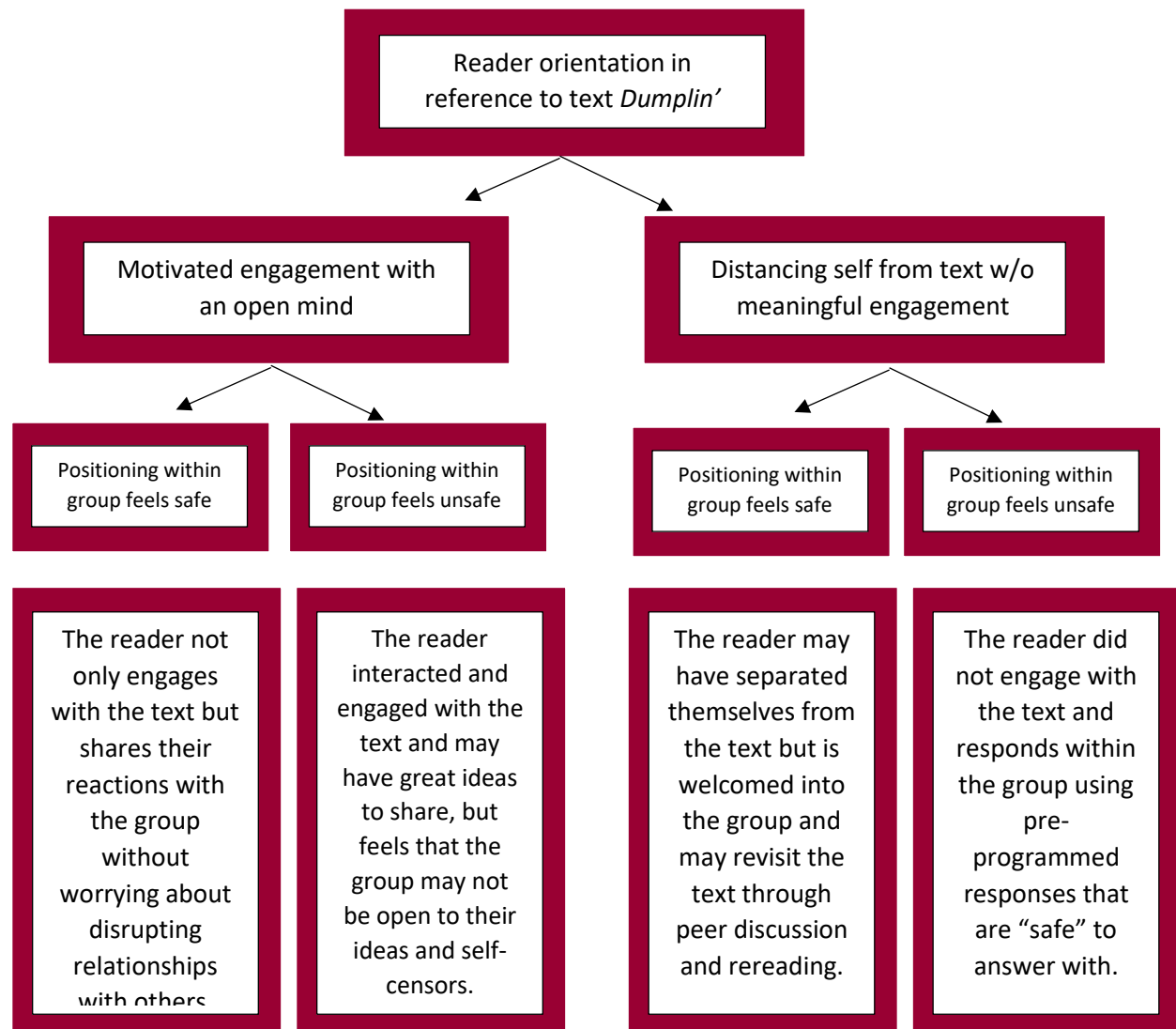
At the foundation of the responses collected within these discussions is how readers position themselves in reference to the text. Louise Rosenblatt's (1982) transactional theory emphasizes that between the reader and the text, both work off one another and are continuously evolving throughout the course of the novel based on previous experiences and understandings. There is no way to know just how the participants positioned themselves in relation to the text and what their reading habits entail when engaging with new text. Readers' individual reading habits assist them with the interpretation and application of what is shared in a text. When reading *Dumplin'*, or any text, readers may find pieces of information that they agree with yet overlook other details, or the text may offer a different perspective from what they know, and the reader may acknowledge the differences and move on (Iser, 1978). While it is a case-by-case basis as to whether or not text, including works focused on body image, makes a direct and lasting impact on the reader, much like a floodgate, the gate needs first to be opened before there is authentic connection to the text. This kind of recognition and method of engaging with text that does not leave a lasting impact is similar to what is seen when readers position themselves outside of a text, separating themselves from what is shared on the page.

Readers, when they engage with text, position themselves in reference to the different elements of the literary work. By doing this, readers decide how they engage with the text, if they do so genuinely at all. Participants that simply read and move on from the book do not benefit from what the text may provide.

Readers may not be comfortable engaging with the text if its subject matter either doesn't directly apply to their personal experience or, on the other side of the spectrum, reminds them too much of their own personal struggles, in this instance body image. Adolescent readers may be openly resistant to certain topics or anticipated perspectives and experiences prior to reading the book. For example, in *Dumplin'*, the life of a fat female protagonist may be met with distant and unengaged readers because the reader may overly identify with the experiences of Willow or not want to take part in discussion when it focuses on an uncomfortable facet of their lives.

On the other side, readers may choose to deeply connect and engage with the text and remain motivated to discuss its content and develop their understanding of what the work shares. While this was the connection I had hoped for as a researcher, it was not the one that I received. If there were readers that wanted to engage and discuss their takeaways from the book, this was not often seen within the group discussions.

Based on the experiences that I recorded in our *Dumplin'* discussions, I was able to chart what I believe to be the process through which students orient themselves within a text, affecting their participation within group discussions and their personal textual experiences.



At the heart of this research is this data I collected and interpreted during the book discussions with these adolescent participants. During the study, I worked with readers that interacted with the text and may have wanted to share their ideas, but refrained, fearing the group's disapproval and readers that did not engage with the text and responded with responses that would maintain their peer approval. Both of these instances indicate that regardless if the readers engaged with the text genuinely, the group's dynamics felt unsafe and they could not participate wholly.



While educators wish to foster engaged book discussions and elicit genuine responses, this is not always the case with adolescent participants. By orienting themselves within the text, readers can set up a non-confrontational stance within group discussions by responding with passive or objective responses. This is evidenced by a selection of safe responses that are drawn upon. These are called “safe” responses because these responses to the text and discussion do not challenge others, share personal opinion, or draw attention to oneself and one’s experiences either with the text or referring to it. These objective and passive responses took the form of literary analysis and platitudes, respectively.

The literary analysis that the adolescent readers participated in engaged the group, however, their topics and their notes on the book were critical of the writing or the choices of its author. Their analysis was posed strictly from a third-party standpoint and did not include their own thoughts or personal experiences with the book. Ash seemed to be the most vocal one of the group in this matter, noting on multiple occasions the book’s “artificiality”. Her review seems to largely discredit the text in its execution and the choices the author made with relationships and characters. Ash may have also taken this position and returned to these responses because she shared that she is a writer herself and mentioned that she turns to the young adult novels she reads to improve her craft. Despite this, in both her written response and in discussions, she talked about anything but the subject of weight or body image. This contrasts with her strong vocalizations about the book, but only from an objective standpoint, not establishing personal connection.

Other participants used this mechanical language when highlighting the criticisms of the text. For example, Regina mentioned how she wasn’t pleased that the characters had been written to be certain body sizes, aware of the reasons behind these choices. Regina had mentioned that

this felt “forced” on the author’s part, and Eva echoed that it felt like some of these male characters did not have a purpose in the book. Both Regina and Eva agreed that the romantic relationships were not wholly necessary to the protagonist’s development but helped along the plot. These criticisms substituted for genuine responses. While this was something for the participants to say, it was said within an echo chamber and served as evidence of participation, not engagement. These participants’ characteristics are similar to that of the reader orientations I charted, where the readers who did not wholly engage with the book did not feel comfortable engaging further in the group.

The passive responses that the participants engaged in were platitudes. By engaging in these platitudes and substituting them as a response, the participants could draw upon them should the need arise. Having a prepared response may have made them more comfortable when in the discussion but it made their responses inauthentic and practiced. Consider the instances where the participants, unbidden, began a stream of platitudes in lieu of sharing what takeaways they had with the book. These responses were styled almost as though they were signing off, each sharing a platitude that they may or may not have believed in genuinely.

During this discussion, Eva brought up an interesting platitude that “Body image doesn’t matter”, which may be based in some confusion. I had not mentioned body image in the discussions other than mentioning it was my focus during recruitment and in the consent/assent forms given to the participants and their guardians. During these two instances, Eva shared that body image does not matter when she may be confused about the word. Body image, as we have previously established is a lens through which one assesses their body. This is not inherently a positive or negative thing, but changes based on the differences in people. However, this was interpreted by Eva to be something negative, as if the way to view one’s body is discouraging.

There is only so much that as an investigator I can speculate without reaching too far with the recorded responses.

Ash was the only member of the group to not engage in these banalities, whether that is a testament to her body type or her ambitions to be an author, I am not sure. The second meeting occurred when everyone was finished with the book, and it was when the platitudes began to flow. It was also when Ash was at her quietest. Though she did share her book review, which highlighted her discontent for the “mediocre” book, she only spoke once more during the meeting. Alicia, her friend, was more vocal, and upon her completion of the book began to make more connections. When one of them would talk, the other would visibly relax and watch them talk; one another’s presence seemed to comfort the other but it may not have been enough to enter a book discussion with three other girls, even though, as I have experienced, adolescent friends can manipulate and dominate a book discussion.

This substantiates my findings that the responses the participants used were given to preserve their peer’s approval and to create a non-confrontational group discussion for all parties. However, as evidenced in the findings, this inhibited genuine discussion.

At this point in adolescent development, peer interaction is not only important to maintaining friendships and cementing a place in a school’s social landscape, but also in forming identity. The participants in the discussion sat beside those they felt comfortable with, acquiesced to more vocal members of the group, and looked around to the group prior to answering, as though censoring themselves and crafting a non-confrontational answer. Within this social situation in which an entire class is condensed to five people that may not run in the same circles, defense may seem to be the only option.

Discussing a topic like body image during a book discussion is uncomfortable at this stage of development for the students, however, and when interacting with students that may not be familiar, this topic may not be the easiest to discuss. In a small group setting, one cannot *not* be aware of who is present and what they might say outside of the group discussion. This is something, as discussion facilitator and visitor to the school I had no control over, though the group operated under confidentiality. As a result, deeper questions that call upon personal experience or feelings regarding body image or the text, with other participants present, may yield inauthentic responses that may be self-censored or edited (Brown & Gilligan, 1993). This kind of suppression of genuine response builds rules that the discussion must follow, though they are unspoken. By doing so, participants are guarded in the kind of response they choose to share regarding the book, even going so far as editing their responses to cater to the researcher (Brown & Gilligan, 1993). Comparatively, their silences also spoke volumes to their discomfort with sharing when a question required additional input. Perpetuating these times of silence or passing the metaphorical microphone on to the next participant, is a learning opportunity for girls that instructs them not to share their reactions or feelings so relationships with others are not damaged but are maintained (Brown & Gilligan, 1993).

Preserving these relationships with the other adolescent participants affected their behavior while in our book discussions. For example, Regina's hesitance in not sharing what she knew about local pageants preserved her relationship with Eva, but it came at the cost of her not sharing what she knew or wanted to share. Opening her mouth to correct her, but withholding, shows that Regina was processing her audience and how her correction would be perceived by others, placing the approval of her peers in jeopardy. Silence proved to be the better response, the safer response to maintain the approval of Eva and their peers.

However, the participants seemed to also manipulate the conversation away from points being made by other students and share generalizations, as in the encounter with Ash and Alberta. One was a perceived-to-be overweight student and a student athlete. This point in the discussion highlighted an interesting group dynamic. Alberta seemed to manipulate the initiating comment made by Ash, and insisted that the bullying sections of the book, where teenagers ridicule classmates based on their physical features, does not exist. As an investigator who previously did not know these participants outside of the study, I can only speculate as to why one participant would interrupt another and change the subject away from a point another group member was making. After Alberta shared her opinion about the bullying in the text, she made a generalization about the entire group not ever having experienced “being an outsider”. This statement was agreed upon by the entire group: enthusiastically by Regina and Eva, but not by Alicia or Ash, who had just been interrupted so Alberta could bring up this point. Their hesitation could be seen as these two friends looked at each other before nodding noncommittally in agreement. This is a great example of the social order within the group as well as the desire to not “rock the boat” within the group or damage existing relationships. Alicia and Ash were good examples of readers featured in the chart that may have engaged with the book and wanted to share meaningful ideas, but in an effort to preserve the approval of their peers, they self-censored and acquiesced to the more vocal members of the group.

### **Limitations to Study**

If given the opportunity to conduct this research in a similar fashion, the first change I would make would be to extend the timeline with the participants. While the two meetings may have been enough to discuss one book, hosting a regular book club meeting during lunches may

have warmed the students to my presence and generated more authentic responses. Coming into the classroom (and this middle school) cold was a limitation of the study, but provided an interesting opportunity to see how they conducted themselves and selected their responses during the discussions. As an aspiring educator, conducting research within my own classroom with students who are familiar with my presence and literary discussions could provide more genuine responses. Providing more opportunities to host discussions and extend the length of the study could help to generate more feedback build stronger rapport with the participants. A final change that I would recommend to other researchers conducting similar reader response data collection is to require written responses when the participants read their text. Only one participant wrote anything down, and if I had provided private journals that would only be read by me (unless volunteered by the students) and required it to be turned in by the end of the study, I could have collected more data from the students that was not influenced by the group discussions.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

No two book discussions are the same, even with the same text. How readers choose to engage with the text and build conversations with one another determines the atmosphere of the book discussion and affects what kinds of responses are voiced. If the subject matter and anticipation of the book discussion makes the readers uncomfortable, they may not engage with the text or be as open to its contents, causing their participation in a book group to be aloof with ready “safe” responses that do not jeopardize relationships or polarize the group. If one is in fear of saying something that others may not like or do not want to hear, why not offer responses that are from an objective, third party stance or are phrases that don’t mean much but do not offend? On the subject of body image, the expectations for girls to *not* discuss fat permeated through to

the discussion as the participants did not talk about “being fat”, but only talked about the protagonist being fat and separating themselves from Willowdean’s experiences in the book. While learning that adolescent girls do not want to share genuine responses in a book discussion may not seem surprising, it is their resorting to pre-programmed responses during book discussions in lieu of discussing relevant topics that is interesting to me as an investigator.

Educators can build better book discussions, featuring book clubs or whole classes, and establish safe places to talk within the classroom or after school, *especially* if the content of the text features topics that may be poignant in the news, in their area, or in their own lives. The observations made in this study were that of typical middle school students, readers that could very well be a part of any language arts class. Teachers might avoid the banalities, silences, and fear of peer approval by continuously working to build a safe environment within the classroom and repeated book discussions that focus on more than just participation but genuine responses. In the event that a teacher has a classroom whose student climate may not be welcoming to individuals wanting to share their experiences with a novel, reading journals can build the foundation to genuine response-driven instruction and group activities. It’s important to take away from this study that my experiences coming into a classroom cold are not unlike the beginning of a school year, and working to build rapport and a sense of comfort in sharing within the classroom, even if it is only for a class period, is a worthy investment in genuine sharing and discussion. The easy response may be to repeat a sentiment or to not directly relate with the character and share experiences, and these responses can be illustrative. However, it is the genuine response that produces engaging and productive book discussions.

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